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AUTHOR	Feely, Ted M., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

An investigation of the function of the term "inquiry" in the field of social studies is made in this conference paper. Inquiry as an activity of student investigation is examined. The distinction is made between student-centered and scholarly-based inquiry in social studies classes. Two perspectives are discussed--inquiry as a process and inquiry as described in terms of the meanings, conceptual structures, or understandings which the inquirer brings to and takes from his encounters with the data of experience. The author concludes his discussion with his definition of inquiry teaching as any and all teaching activities directed toward securing student inquiry. (SHM)

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AN ANALYSIS OF INQUIRY IN THE SOCIAL STUDIES

by

Ted M. Feely, Jr.
Assistant Professor of Education
University of Delaware
Newark, Delaware 19711

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"Perspectives on the New Social Studies: Some Theoretical Perspectives"

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AN ANALYSIS OF INQUIRY IN THE SOCIAL STUDIES

Educators operate within two realms. The first is the realm of action. The second is the realm of thought The latter includes talking about teaching and learning, investigating teaching and learning, etc. Most of us subscribe to the notion these two realms should mutually support and enhance one another. That is, our actions as teachers should be guided and influenced by our intellectualizations and our intellectualizations should be guided and influenced by the realm of action.

One of the major difficulties which inhibits our thinking about educational action is the vagueness and ambiguity of many educational terms. This brings me to the topic of the present paper and to the question I hope we will all address for the next few minutes. Namely, what do we mean in the social studies by the term "inquiry?"

Writers in the social studies have indicated that the term inquiry functions in several ways in the social studies. Today, I would like to examine several of these and make some distinctions which I hope will help us to overcome some of the language snarls we sometimes fall prey to. First, I will examine inquiry as an activity of student investigation and will make a distinction between what can be called student centered inquiry and scholarly-based inquiry. Next, I will examine the act of inquiry from two perspectives and argue that an over-reliance upon one way of understanding inquiry has led to some difficulties. Third, I will look briefly at the distinction between open and closed inquiry and will relate it to some empirical questions we may wish to investigate. Finally, I will examine what is meant by the concept of "inquiry teaching."

INQUIRY AS STUDENT INVESTIGATION

Throughout the social studies literature there is general agreement that inquiry involves students learning on their own. Probably no single strand in the threads of meaning running throughout the leterature is as frequently encountered as the idea that inquiring is "trying to figure out things for oneself" or learning on one's own. Yet, it seems to me that this notion of the student learning on his own through inquiry veils two quite different types of classroom activities. I have dubbed these student-centered inquiry and scholarly-based inquiry, and will simply refer to them as "student" and "scholarly" inquiry. Let's examine each of these briefly and then contrast them.

Student inquiry is demarcated from scholarly inquiry by its emphasis upon student-directed, autonomous and personally meaningful learning. In its most radical form it means that students (1) choose their own problems of topics, (2) attack these problems or topics in a manner they deem appropriate and (3) interpret findings from their own frames of reference. The selection of problems or topics rests with the individual student or group of students based upon the personal significance of these problems in their lives. From this perspective the process of inquirying is frequently conceived as "the natural way of learning." That is, it is not an esoteric set of technical competencies, it is merely the way in which a child learns naturally. As Strain has stated, ". . . it is so simple and natural a process that its use is easier to permit than to require or teach."[1]

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[1] Lucile B. Strain, "Inquiry and Social Studies for Disadvantaged Learners," The S. S., LXI (April, 1970), p. 147.

Shifting to another conception of inquiry, in scholarly-based inquiry emphasis is shifted from students operating from their own frames of reference as in student inquiry to an emphasis on the scholarly grounds upon which rigorous and disciplined inquiring takes place. Emphasis is upon the conceptions and procedures of scholarly investigation. (Tucker's paper can be seen as an effort toward clarifying several aspects of this scholarly-based emphasis.) Inquiry according to the scholarly conception is not simply self-directed investigation based upon common sense frames of reference, but is, investigation grounded on the concepts and procedures of scholarship. It is disciplined and rigorous investigation. Inquiry as scholarly investigation is not simply investigation and exploration of problematic topics, but it is investigation guided by the criteria, or rules, of scholarship. Whereas "personal autonomy" and "personal significance" are central to the concept of student-centered inquiry, rigor or disciplined investigation is central to scholarly inquiry.

Whereas the implicit task of teachers who conceive of inquiry as student-centered is to make use of the frames of reference of their students as a basis for classroom activiti ., those conceiving of inquiry as scholarly-based are seeking to induct students into special frames of reference, the frames of reference of the scholarly community.

One of the persistent dangers facing social studies educators is the confusion of these two conceptions of inquiry and, therefore, the confusion of implications and inferences to be drawn from the conceptions for educational practice. A consistent implication of the student-centered notion is that the teacher's direct influence on the ways in which students operate in and conceptualize the world around them

should be minimal. The teacher may structure an environment within which students inquire and in that way influence inquiry. However, the notion that the teacher should impose a "correct" way of proceeding or of viewing the world is antithetical. On the other hand, the conception of scholarly-based inquiry points toward the teacher's active intervention in not only the process of inquiry, but in the very ways of thinking and operating which comprise the process. The conception of scholarly-based inquiry points toward a need for the teacher to somehow bring his students to the point at which they are able to inquire in a rigorous, scholarly, or, at least, semi-scholarly manner. In a very real sense, the teacher who would institute scholarly-based inquiry in his classroom must bring his students to a point at which they are able to so manipulate a scholarly frame of reference that that frame of reference becomes the student's own.

I would contend that many of the confusions which surround the meaning of inquiry in the social studies can be located in a failure to distinguish between the logic of student-centered and the logic of scholarly-based inquiry. Both share the notion that students should learn on their own. If one could assume that students would automatically operate from scholarly grounds of investigation then the distinction between student-centered and scholarly-based inquiry would melt away. But it is precisely this assumption which one cannot make, for to make it one would have to presume that students are qualitatively speaking scholars.

There is a certain incompatibility of these two notions of inquiry which places social studies educators in a conceptual bind. On the one hand, those who adopt a primarly student-centered view of inquiry

are in the bind of deciding how they are to interact with their students. As noted earlier, some educators have suggested that inquiry happens naturally. Yet, what does a teacher do with students who simply do not "inquire?" The difficulty the student-centered teacher faces is the constant danger of violating the very meaning of student-centered inquiry by imposing himself, his priorities and ways of viewing the world upon his students.

The teacher who would emphasize scholarly-based inquiry is, probably, in a greater conceptual bind, for the language and logic of student inquiry is powerful and pervasive. The notion that students "figure out things on their own" has strong tinges, if not outright implications, which indicate that the teacher should not impose himself upon student inquiry. Should he tell his students how to inquire, or should this emerge from the process of inquiry? Dare he correct students who have come to an incorrect conclusion, or is there no such thing as an "incorrect conclusion?" In short, should he impose himself and his views upon the process of inquiry and, thereby, endanger the very meaning of inquiry or should he step back, permitting things to happen as they will, and thereby take the change that ignorance begets ignorance.

In the next section I would like to raise a hypothesis regarding why the distinction between student and scholarly inquiry is overlooked in the social studies literature.

TWO PERSPECTIVES ON THE ACT OF INQUIRY

It appears that there are two ways in which the act of inquiry is typically understood. Let's think of these as windows on two sides of

a building in which inquiry is taking place. The windows enable us to look in on inquiry from two different perspectives or dimensions. The window from which inquiry is most frequently viewed in the social studies literature provides a perspective on inquiry as process. This process conception is usually described in terms of Dewey's notions of "identifying problems," "formulating hypotheses," "testing hypotheses," etc. A second window from which to view inquiry conceives of it in terms of the content or knowledge being investigated. Terms such as data, concepts, structures, questions, explanations and types of problems can be viewed through the content window.

From the process perspective, the procedures of inquiry are considered to transcend any particular body of content and are considered applicable in a wide variety of situations. Despite differences in detail and emphasis among the myriad process descriptions of inquiry the unifying conception of this dimension is that inquiry is a set of procedures which can be generalized to a wide range of investigative situations. From this perspective the activities of the infant as he gropes to understand his world can be understood as basically the same process as the activities of the scholar in his attempts to push back the frontiers of knowledge. Both identify problems, generate and test hypotheses, etc. Both are engaged in the process of inquiry.

In contrast to this the view through the content window is quite different. From this perspective, inquiry is described in terms of the meanings, conceptual structures, or understandings which the inquirer brings to and takes from his encounters with the data of experience. The key characteristic of inquiry from this perspective is the great diver-

sity of data, concepts, questions, and purposes which characterize the act of inquiry. From this perspective the infant, the third grade child and the scholar are engaged in very different undertakings. The types of problems they face, the concepts they employ, the types of explanations they seek are quite different.

I would like to argue that any attempt to conceptualize inquiry solely by describing inquiry from one of these perspectives, or dimensions, to the exclusion of the other will lead to a distortion. The view through the procedural window leads us to believe that all inquiry is essentially the same process, whereas the view from the content window leads us to believe that each act of inquiry is unique and shares little with other acts of inquiry.

To return to my purpose in describing these two perspectives on inquiry, it appears to me that we have failed to make the distinction between student and scholarly inquiry because of our intellectual preoccupation with process conceptions of inquiry.

EMERGENT AND PRE-CONCEIVED INQUIRY

Inquiry in the social studies has come to indicate both a process in which investigation is directed toward open-ended questions from which answers are expected to emerge as well as a process directed by the teacher or curriculum materials toward a preconceived substantive outcome. I believe that we are all so well acquainted with this distinction that it needs no more description. Rather, I would like to explore the distinction and its implications from several points of view.

First, I think that we should recognize that closed or preconceived

inquiry represents a radical departure in the meaning of inquiry from its use in many non-educational settings. Second, one of the most significant implications of the distinction between "preconceived" and "emergent" outcomes is that it points toward a potential weakness in the commonly accepted notion that there is a continum bounded by the notions of expository and inquiry teaching strategies.[1]

Expository ——— Inquiry

Beyer describes expository teaching as essentially "telling" whereas inquiry is "finding-out-for-yourself."[2]

The fact that inquiry is sometimes conceived in terms of a preconceived outcome toward which the teacher directs inquiry indicates that the single dimension of expository/didactic teaching and inquiry/discovery teaching may hide more than it reveals. What is not revealed by this single dimension is whether the teacher is trying to get students to come to a predetermined outcome or whether the outcome is seen as open-ended with the possibility that any of a wide range of outcomes might emerge. What is needed is a way of schematically distinguishing these two types of inquiry situations. The following two-dimensional schema does that.

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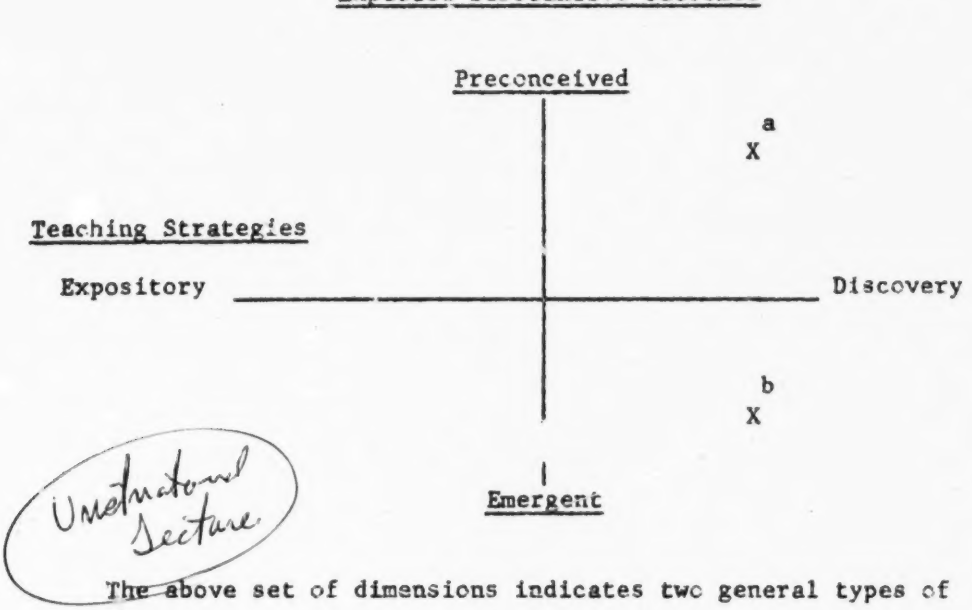
[1] Barry K. Beyer, Inquiry in the Social Studies Classroom (Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1971), p. 10. Many readers will recognize this same continuum as essentially one reported by Fenton in The New Social Studies (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1967), p. 33.

[2] Ibid.



Unstructured Lecture

The above set of dimensions indicates two general types of inquiry situations. In Quadrant X_a the teacher has preconceived the outcome of inquiry and directs inquiry toward that preconceived outcome. Quadrant X_b points to inquiry in which the outcomes are not preconceived by the teacher. In its most extreme form, the teacher prior to inquiry may be as ignorant of the final outcomes of inquiry as the students. Note, in both types of inquiry students can be said to be "figuring things out for themselves"; the teacher is not telling them what the outcome should be.

Just how teachers and students can be expected to differ in what they experience and learn as a result of these two types of inquiry is an interesting empirical question. I will raise some hypotheses.

The notion that inquiry is a classroom activity which can be used by the teacher to teach preconceived bodies of substantive content may render inquiry more teachable than the notion that inquiry should be aimed toward emergent outcomes. By preconceiving outcomes the teacher or curriculum developer is provided with a useful focal

point for planning lessons. Strategies for bringing about "problematic situations" can be planned in advance and data for testing hypotheses can be selected and organized by the teacher or curriculum planner in advance of instruction.

On the other hand, several questions can be raised with regard to what students may be expected to learn from such inquiry. First, as LaForse has pointed out

> . . . clever and discerning pupils might shortly plug into the ground rules of the discovery game as the class plays it and read the predilections of the teacher and the programmer and reduce the whole exercise to a 'con-game' in which, as Jules Henry points out, pupils learn to give teacher what she wants.[1]

In short, LaForse is raising the possibility that inquiry as directed toward preconceived outcomes may result in students learning how to figure out what is on the teacher's mind, but not necessarily in learning how to inquire on their own.

What can students be expected to learn in terms of inquiry ability as they are directed by the teacher to preconceived outcomes? One outcome which might occur would be a largely distorted notion of what it means to inquire. Where students are taught to come to preconceived outcomes and taught that this is what is meant by "inquiring," students may be expected to come to several frail, if not faulty, conclusions. One would be that there is a single best answer to any problematic situation. To the extent that the teacher is intent upon directing students to the teacher's own pet answers, one could hypothesize that students would conclude that there is usually or always a single

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[1] Martin LaForse, "The New Social Studies Mania: Pause for Thought," The Social Studies, LXI (December, 1970), 327. See also, Jules Henry, "Docility, or Giving Teacher What She Wants," Journal of Social Issues, II (1955), 33-41.

best answer to questions. Furthermore, students may continue to live in the delusion that "experts" know all the answers to all important questions and that the task of the student in the "new" social studies is to find out what the experts already know as opposed to the "traditional" social studies where students needed merely to read the answers in their texts.

Another set of outcomes which might result from such an approach would be the expectation and belief by students that all questions have an answer and that all investigations lead to suitable answers. In addition, it is possible that students would develop little competency in what it means to formulate an answerable question from an indeterminate situation or what it means to seek out evidence or grounds upon which to draw conclusions. On the other hand, where largely open-ended inquiry is the case the teacher can be expected to feel much less control over the situation. First, the teacher may not possess an adequate conceptual structure to deal with the indeterminacies which may arise. Second, where inquiry is more open-ended the locus of inquiry may be expected to shift from an interaction of teacher with students where the teacher is the focus of attention to one in which students are engaged in individual or small group activities. The teacher may feel as though he has less control over what the students are doing. He may, also, come to question the legitimacy of a role in which he is not at the center of attention directing each activity of the class.

In a similar vein, students may become frustrated. First, they may not be able to answer the questions they have set out to answer. Students, particularly very young and "naive" ones, have an uncanny ability to ask the big questions such as why are some people bad or

why do some white people think they are better than black people? " These "big questions" which students may ask point by contrast to a characteristic of disciplined or scholarly inquiry which is frequently overlooked. This is the fact that many questions which we really want to find answers for cannot be answered rigorously in the form in which the questions are being asked. The key point to note is that it is possible that students and teachers may have a great deal of difficulty in formulating questions which can be rigorously answered.

INQUIRY TEACHING

Finally, I would like to take a look at what is meant by the term "inquiry teaching," for it contributes to a great deal of confusion in the social studies. First I will briefly set forth what I believe the dominant conception is. Then I will indicate why I believe that conception is one we should avoid and finally, I will present a substitute notion.

The social studies literature is prevaded with the notion that inquiry teaching is the discovery method. Gage has defined the "discovery method" as ". . . teaching in which the teacher withholds from pupils the concepts and principles they are to learn . . . ."[1] That is, the discovery method is seen as a way in which the teacher may organize instruction so that students figure out things on their own.

It is my contention that the notion of inquiry teaching as "discovery method" is an overly narrow conception of the teacher's role and activities in inquiry and exhibits a fatal weakness.

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[1] N. L. Gage, Encyclopedia of Educational Research, 4th Ed., p.1455.

The weakness is that it provides a conceptual answer to an empirical problem. Let me explain what I mean by this.

If one accepts the proposition that inquiry teaching is teaching which is designed to bring about student inquiring, then the question of what inquiry teaching is becomes an empirical problem. That is, if inquiry teaching is a potentially wide range of teaching practices which lead students to inquire, then questions about how one teaches need to be answered empirically. The social studies literature is full of statements which either imply or explicitly state that inquiry teaching involves having students figure things out on their own. Yet, is that the whole of it?

I think not. Beyer in his recent book on inquiry in the social studies quite rightly points out that a teacher may find that lecture or other didactic presentations are useful techniques for contributing to student inquiry. O weakness of the concept of inquiry teaching qua discovery method is that it does not provide for teaching situations which might legitimately be said to contribute toward students' ability to inquire but which are not, themselves, instances of inquiring. For example, are there not times when the teacher might find it reasonable and efficient to didactically present information, concepts, notions of procedure, or terminology which are directly aimed toward securing student inquiry but which are not presented by the "discovery method?"

In short, we need to liberate teachers from the notion that inquiry teaching is a technique in which the teacher induces students to figure out things on their own. Rather, we should conceive of inquiry teaching as any and all teaching activities directed toward securing student inquiry.